

# Arts & Show

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 1990

## Willie Dixon and friends to salute the world capital of blues, Chicago



Paul Natkin / Photo Reserve

Willie Dixon



Paul Natkin / Photo Reserve

Irma Thomas

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BY DAVE HOEKSTRA

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**L**OS ANGELES—The old fighter sleeps in his favorite chair in the corner of his living room ring. It is a sticky September afternoon in suburban Glendale—*mellow down easy*, as Little Walter once sang. It is a good day for respite.

Across the way from the peaceful fighter is an empty coat stand that looks like a tree in winter. Atop the tree rests a snow white derby. You connect the crown with the old champion. That's Willie Dixon.

The 75-year-old Dixon is the heavyweight champion of the blues. He comes home as the king of the Benson & Hedges Blues Festival, which will run from Oct. 7-13 at Chicago area locations. Some call Muddy Waters the father of the blues, but no one could bob and weave between ribald rhythms like Dixon.

Consider the output on the Willie Dixon box set from Chess-MCA Records. Dixon wrote "(I'm Your) Hoochie Coochie Man" for Waters. Dixon wrote "Mellow Down Easy" for Little Walter & His Jukes. Dixon wrote "Spoonful" for Howlin' Wolf. Dixon wrote "Wang Dang Doodle" for Koko Taylor. Dixon wrote "You Need Love" for Muddy, and Led Zeppelin "reinterpreted" it as "Whole Lotta Love" (in 1987, Dixon's copyright was settled suit out of court). I could go on, but by the time I finished, we'd be back in Book Week.

Long before Dixon was a songwriter, house bassist and arranger-producer at Chess Records, he was a very good boxer, the winner of the Illinois State Golden Gloves heavyweight championship (he fought at 230 pounds in the novice division) in 1937.

Dixon wakes up from his gentle nap and begins to bask in stories of elemental boxing and the summertime blues. He spends more than three hours talking about the blues, periodically telling his grandchildren in a nearby kitchen to keep it down. "They get all excited when I do interviews," he says.

To understand Dixon's blues, it helps to understand boxing.

"Timing is a very good thing for both," Dixon says. "My mother used to say, 'The more you know about anything, the better off you are about everything, and one thing helps the other thing all the time, anyway.' Unconsciously, I did relate boxing with music. I learned to time things pretty well [in boxing]. That was great for counterpointing [in music]. I timed a guy's [musical] licks the same way I would counter-

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# Willie Dixon

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punch. [Counterpunching is a punch thrown in response to an opponent's lead.]

"Come to think of it, my best efforts were counterpointing," he said. "When I fought, I could hit right- or left-handed. If I had to hit someone, he had to pull his hand back—unless he's extremely fast with the one-two." Dixon laughs and says, "But you check out those things before you get in the ring with a guy."

Dixon built up his boxer's strength as a manchild near his hometown of Vicksburg, Miss. He used to haul logs to help build cabins, and he worked in levee camps. "I used to be young and strong," Dixon says with a sigh. "When I was young, I thought no one could hurt me, no way."

Besides the Golden Gloves win, Dixon's most notable boxing accomplishment was to serve as a feisty sparring partner to heavyweight champion Joe Louis. He used to shoot the jab with Louis in the basement of Eddie Nichols' gym at 15th and Indiana.

"I held up real well against Joe Louis," Dixon proudly says. "My manager and his manager had a grudge against each other. My manager [ex-fighter Tiger Williams] would tell me to knock the hell out of him. Louis always had the idea to get the best lick in or don't trade licks. My manager would say, 'Beat him to the punch and knock him out if you can.' Hell, the managers would almost come to fight themselves."

The choppy bravado that later defined Dixon's music surfaced in 1938 when the young fighter and his fly-by-night manager, Jab Burton, got into a brawl of their own in the boxing commissioner's office. "I thought I should be making more money than I was," Dixon says. "He and I had quite a tussle up there. They expelled me and him from the ring for six months.

"I never did get back."

However, an itinerant musician named Leonard "Baby Doo" Caston was hanging around Eddie Nichols' gym. Baby Doo always had a guitar in hand and Dixon remembered them harmonizing ringside.

"I could sing pretty good, because I had been around spiritual things in the South," Dixon recalls. "And I knew all the bass lines because we used to imitate the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. So Baby Doo made me a tin can with one string tied to a stick. He showed me how to play bass on that. Well, the people got a kick out me playing this tin can and slapping it. You could make some pretty good rhythms on it."

By 1939, Baby Doo and Dixon had formed a group called the Five Breezes. The lead singer was named Cool Breeze (Freddie Walker) and they began gigging around Chicago.

"We got a job working at Jim Martin's on the West Side of Chicago," Dixon says. "He was a politician, and he had a little casino in the club. Everybody liked us over there. He asked me if I wanted to buy a real bass, but then he said, 'You're having so much fun with this thing you got here, a real bass might take the show away.' He finally bought one for me and I paid him back, little by little. I learned to do the same thing on that that I was doing on tin-can bass."

He sure did.

Dixon became heavyweight champion of the blues because of the prolific work he did at Chess Records. Dixon was recently honored by BMI publishing, which draped him with a printout of more than 500



## Why is Willie Dixon on top of a camel?

"Me and Memphis Slim were in Israel," Dixon said. "We were on the first American Folk Blues Festival tour [around 1960]. We were down by the Red Sea, checking out what was happening. Slim said, 'Man, why don't you ride the camel?' I said I had never been on a camel in my life. He said, 'I'll take a picture.' So, you know how when you get on a camel, he has to

be down and then you both go up? As he was getting up, the camel was grunting real loud. I was kind of fat and Slim thought the camel was grunting because I was on it. Then it looked like I was going to fall off backwards. Slim started laughing so hard, he couldn't take the picture. Some other guy took this picture."

of his songs, mostly written for Chess artists. The blues wreath fell from his neck to the floor.

Dixon began work at Chess in 1948 as a studio player on a Robert Nighthawk track. He became a full-time employee in 1951. He took a hiatus to competing Cobra Records in 1956, returning to Chess in 1959. As the electric bass moved into the blues, there was less tolerance for Dixon's loyalty to the upright bass. He left Chess Records in 1969 to form the Chicago All-Stars touring band.

"The Chess brothers [Leonard and Phil] were pretty smart people," Dixon says. "They didn't know the business, but they always hired people who knew what they were doing. Frankly, the Chess brothers had no idea about backbeat and rhythm. We got a good studio band that understood these things."

Besides Dixon, the catalyst for many sessions was the late pianist Lafayette Leake, whose expanse stretched all the way to the first cut of Chuck Berry's "Maybelline." Dixon removed Berry's regular pianist in favor of Leake. That's also Dixon playing bass on legendary tracks like Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," Bo Diddley's "Hey, Bo Diddley" and even the Moonglows' "Sincerely."

Before playing at this summer's Chicago Blues Festival, former Checker Records (part of Chess Records) guitarist Lowell Fulson told me how little free

dom the Chess brothers allowed him. The saucy horns that filled out Fulson's Texas blues didn't match the stark musical agenda of producer Leonard Chess.

"Some of the guys didn't get freedom," Dixon says. "A new artist always thought they had to think like the old artist to be good. But if you sound too much like somebody else, it really ain't no good."

"That was my job—to restyle people into a different feeling."

That was how Dixon arrived at his multipatterned approach of writing and arranging. Dixon knew exactly how to write for the rough, ruminating vocals of Howlin' Wolf ("Back Door Man"), yet he also had instinct for Muddy Waters' bawdy aggressiveness ("I'm Ready," "I Just Want To Make Love To You").

"Most people don't realize all the different styles of American music were created from blues, one way or the other by rearrangement," he says. "They had to rename them to get people interested. Even today, people don't know what blues are. The blues have rhythm—which everything has. It has music—which everyone in the world likes. And the blues have wisdom—which is the only music in the world that actually teaches wisdom in all forms. And wisdom tells the true facts of life."

That is why Dixon is somewhat satisfied with this summer's re-emergence of the Chess studios at 2120

S. Michigan. Before the Chicago Blues Festival in June, the building was given landmark status. The building is owned by former Chess studio musician Gerald Sims, who plans to turn it into a "living museum where artists can record."

Dixon says, "I think it's a good idea—if they do anything with it. I thought it would be a good spot to have the Blues Heaven Foundation [which Dixon and manager Scott Cameron created in 1982]. I would have never left Chicago, but I got pretty sick [in 1977, he lost a foot to diabetes and he suffers from arthritis and rheumatism], and I had to come out here. I like Chess, but frankly, I think it's a little too small for what I had in mind [using the building as a base for the Blues Heaven Foundation]."

The Blues Heaven Foundation had approached Sims about purchasing the building, but Sims would not sell.

There are three major objectives of the Blues Heaven Foundation. The organization assists young students with its Muddy Waters Scholarship Fund. It helps older blues artists track down royalties through an extensive resource library. The foundation eventually plans to establish a legal referral service and program for royalty investigations. Finally, the foundation has donated \$12,000 worth of band instruments to high schools in Chicago, Memphis, Los Angeles and Vicksburg, Miss. The gifts were made in memory of Memphis Slim, Little Brother Montgomery (Dixon's early hero), Howlin' Wolf and Big Joe Turner. Supporters of Blues Heaven include John Mellencamp, Dan Aykroyd and George Thorogood. (For more information, write the Blues Heaven Foundation Inc., Box 6926, 2001 W. Magnolia Blvd., Burbank, Calif. 91506.)

Dixon sees the blues as the foundation for common sense.

At the postscript of Dixon's comprehensive oral history *The Willie Dixon Story—I Am the Blues*, co-written with care by Los Angeles journalist Don Snowden (Dixon will be signing copies of the book Oct. 11 at Guild Books, 2456 N. Lincoln), Dixon suggests the favorite song in his dazzling catalog is an obscure 1984 composition, "It Don't Make Sense (You Can't Make Peace)."

"When I first made that little 45 [single], I sent it to President Reagan and Congress," Dixon says. "They sent me some cufflinks. See, the blues have been neglected so long until people automatically neglect them. People think the blues are always sad. The blues are the true facts—good, bad, right or wrong. So, 'It Don't Make Sense,' like all other blues songs, is making a statement of the fact. And the fact is it don't make sense if you can't make peace."

Dixon sits up in his chair and gives an impromptu reading:

*You have made great planes to scan the skies,  
you gave sight to the blind with other men's eyes.  
You even made submarines stay submerged for weeks,  
but it don't make sense you can't make peace.  
You take one man's heart to make another man live,  
you even go to the moon and come back thrilled.  
You can crush any country in a matter of weeks, but it  
don't make sense you can't make peace.*

Everything falls silent—including the commotion in the kitchen.

"See, everybody can live and have peace right here on Earth as it was intended to be in the first place," Dixon says, shadowboxing with his grand ideals. "Just suppose—for a minute—the world spent half as [much] money trying to make peace as it has spent on making war. Don't you know it would be a beautiful world?"

The minute has impact.

The old fighter knows how to punch out wise words.

# Irma Thomas wears crown of 'Soul Queen'

By Dave Hoekstra

**S**AN FRANCISCO—A few burning bridges away from here, wedged in the west side of New Orleans, is a smokin' little nightclub called the Lion's Den. It sits among the well-worn bail bond shops and warehouses of the funky 3rd Ward.

The Lion's Den seats 75 people on a prayer. A couple of strings of twinkling Christmas lights define the limited space of the room. If you get the night right, you can hear Irma Thomas sing there. Sometimes you'll see Irma cook her famous red beans and rice. And, between sets, Irma most likely will be behind the bar, serving a drink or signing autographs.

That range of innocent accessibility makes Thomas as one of the most direct soul singers around. Thomas, "The Soul Queen of New Orleans," will help close out the Benson & Hedges Blues Festival when she appears in "Dynamic Divas of Rhythm & Blues" at 8 p.m. Oct. 13 at the Arie Crown Theatre. Sharing the bill with Thomas will be Nell Carter, Koko Taylor and Ruth Brown.

"The Lion's Den?" Thomas asked during an interview here. "Oh, my. It was my husband's [Emile Jackson's] idea to open it up five years ago. I used it for a rehearsal space. It was a lot better than using our garage. We decided to have live entertainment there on weekends. When we're not working, I'll sit in. Or, if there's someone playing something I like, I'll walk up there and sing with them." Soul singer Barbara "I Know (You Don't Love Me No More)" George often shares the bill with Thomas, and George headlines on many Sunday nights.

The modesty of the Lion's Den makes one think of Thomas' humble beginnings. Her first exposure to rhythm and blues came when she was 5 years old. Thomas' family lived in a rooming house in the back of the Bell Motel in New Orleans.

"The lady who owned the hotel was a friend of my parents," Thomas said. "She said I could go in and listen to the jukebox whenever I wanted to. I remember 'Saturday Night Fish Fry' by Louis Jordan, 'I'll Get Along' by Cecil Gant and lots of Percy Mayfield, who I loved. All those records hung around a lot longer than they do now. I remember they were still on the jukebox when I was 9 or 10."

The stage is bigger these days.

The 49-year-old Thomas was in the Bay Area for a few weeks at the end of the summer for a little rest (she has a daughter here) and to cut a new live album for Rounder Records. In a mid-August session at Slim's (the San Francisco club co-owned by Boz Scaggs), Thomas and her eight-piece band, the Professionals, ran through a deeply melodic set that covered her hits like "It's Raining" and "Ruler of My Heart," as well as challenging covers like the Doobie Brothers' "What a Fool Believes" and Lulu's 1970 ballad "Oh Me, Oh My ("I'm a Fool for You, Baby)."

The Bay Area has special place in Thomas' heart, since she lived between San Francisco and Sacramento between 1970 and 1974. In the early '70s, Thomas scored a regional hit here, recording Jerry Williams Jr.'s "If I Had It To Do All Over Again, I'd Do It All Over You" on Fungus Records.

And at a San Francisco hotel gig in 1974, Thomas began her now-famous second-line routine where she waves a big white handkerchief, cueing fans to do likewise. "It came out of watching some bored tourists," she said. "These tourists were in

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## Thomas

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lounge, and they were bored to hell. Not that my show was boring, but it wasn't the type of music they planned to see that evening.

"As a singer, I'm very observant how people react to certain things. I told the band what I was going to do. After we got into a song, I brought the music down and started telling the audience a little history about the second line [New Orleans funeral march]. I told them I wanted them to participate. They had all kinds of fun. They brought some more people back the next night. They didn't know many songs, they just wanted me to 'do that thing with the handkerchief.' For the next five weeks, that was the thing to do in San Francisco. It caught on, and it became a part of my act."

During Thomas' upcoming set, listen to how she pays attention to lyrics and phrasing. Her vocals are characterized by ringing warmth and keen instincts. Her voice is getting better with age.

New Orleans producer Allen Toussaint is often credited for polishing Thomas' style. She enjoyed her first hit in 1958 with the gruff blues of "Don't Mess With My Man" on New Orleans' Ron

Records, but when Thomas moved to Minit Records, Toussaint smoothed out the rough edges in ballads like "It's Raining" and "I Did My Part."

"There may be others that thought he evened me out, but I didn't think so," Thomas said. "Remember, I was 17 when I did 'Don't Mess With My Man.' I was a growing person. Even though I was married with kids and all that stuff, I was still developing physically. As you develop, your voice develops. The way that Allen would work with you is that he would tailor make a song for the artist, and in turn teach it to you. So in learning the song, he would show you little inflections on certain notes to give it a certain flavor. You learn all these little tricks, unknowing to yourself. I never noticed a big change in my voice—although when I listen to it now, I can hear a great change."

How has Thomas' rhythm and blues persisted in black music's technó age?

"It is sensible music," she said. "Most of us true R & B people still use live musicians. We haven't gone to the synthesized orchestras. We've kept the faith and hung in there with real music. I can't imagine anybody truly enjoying a show consisting of an artist and only four musicians who are creating the sound of a full band."

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## Tempo Arts

# In search of Blues

Festival promises a week filled with the sound Chicago loves

By Howard Reich  
Entertainment writer

**A**lthough Chicago has been home to blues music for most of this century, the scene will be heating up beginning Sunday.

That's when the **Benson & Hedges Blues Festival** opens, launching a week-long marathon of performances, films and seminars at various Chicago clubs, theaters and the like.

Here is a day-by-day preview of the festivities, which includes both ticketed and free events. For general information, phone 312-24-BLUES.

Sunday, noon. "Blues and Gospel Brunch," Schuba's Tavern, 3159 N. Southport Ave. Singer Gloria Hardiman will perform for Sunday brunchers; 312-525-2508.

Sunday, 3 p.m. "Blues and Gospel on Film," Du Sable Museum of African-American History, 740 E. 56th Pl. Two films on the blues will be screened: "Big City Blues" (1982) and "The Singing Stream" (1988). Both movies document celebrated and unknown blues masters, including Billy Branch, Son Seals and Queen Sylvia Embry; 312-947-0600.

Monday, noon. "Blues on State Street," under the marquee of the Chicago Theatre, 175 N. State St. David "Honeyboy" Edwards, a country blues player in his 70s, opens this series of daily, noon-time performances outside the Chicago Theatre. The series will continue, at noon each day, with pianist Barrehouse Chuck Goering on Tuesday; guitarist John Campbell, Wednesday; guitarist Smokey Smothers, Thursday; and gospel singers Rev. Leon Pinson and Rev. Elder Wilson, Friday.

Monday, 7 p.m. "Blues on the Airwaves and in the Groove," Chess Recording Studios, 2120 S. Michigan Ave. Blues radio announcers will discuss the history of blues broadcasts in Chicago. The event takes place in the historic though long-defunct Chess Recording Studios, where a generation of great blues performers recorded after World War II.

Monday, 9 p.m. "Stormy Mon-



Pinetop Perkins performs Wednesday at Legends on Wabash Ave.

## Blues

day," 1815 Club, 1815 W. Roosevelt Rd. Blues saxophonist Eddie Shaw, once a member of Muddy Waters' band, plays a tribute to Howlin' Wolf. Local and visiting blues artists are expected to drop in for jam sessions; 312-666-1500.

Tuesday, noon. "Blues on State Street." See Monday noon listing.

Tuesday, noon. "Speaking of the Blues," Chicago Public Library



The Kinsey Report performs Friday, Oct. 12, at the Arie Crown Theatre in McCormick Place.



Koko Taylor



Elvin Bishop

evening will feature Lonnie Brooks, and Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials; 312-525-8989.

Wednesday, noon. "Blues on State Street." See noon Monday listing.

Wednesday, 9 p.m. "Legends at Legends," Buddy Guy's Legends, 754 S. Wabash Ave. Blues players from Antone's, a celebrated club

Hedges Blues Express." A bus will board at 9 p.m. at each of several clubs, taking fans to a variety of venues through the night. The spots include Blue Chicago, B.L.U.E.S., B.L.U.E.S. Etc., Wise Fools Pub, Kingston Mines and Rosa's Blues Lounge.

Friday, Oct. 12, noon. "Blues on State Street." See noon Monday listing.

Friday, 8 p.m. "Boogie 'Til the Break of Day," Arie Crown Theatre in McCormick Place, 2301 S. Lake Shore Drive. This evening of headliners will feature John Lee Hooker, Dr. John and the Felicity Street Funk Band (featuring guest Willie Dixon), Elvin Bishop and the Kinsey Report; 312-791-7500 or 312-702-1919.

Saturday, Oct. 13, 8 p.m. "Dynamic Divas of Rhythm and Blues," Arie Crown Theatre. This evening spotlights blues singers Koko Taylor, Ruth Brown, Irma Thomas and Nell Carter; 312-791-7500 or 312-702-1919.

Saturday, midnight. "After Hours at the New Checkerboard," New Checkerboard Lounge, 423 E. 43rd St. This wee-hours set will close the festival with a performance by guitarist Johnny Christian.

# Music

## Concert line

By Chris Heim

# Benson & Hedges Blues visiting home of the blues

**B**ringing a blues festival to Chicago is like carrying coals to Newcastle.

With a wealth of talent (from surviving masters of the classic Chicago blues era to an exciting new generation of performers), various clubs and an annual free festival in Grant Park that brings in major talent from other parts of the country, Chicago has a stockpile of blues riches virtually no other city can match. But there, perhaps, is also the problem. With so much music available on a regular basis, it's easy to take blues for granted here. So if nothing else, Benson & Hedges Blues serves to remind us of the treasures in our own back yard.

Benson & Hedges Blues, a 3-year-old showcase series making its Chicago debut Sunday and continuing through Oct. 13, offers a variety of concerts, forums and other events. Among the highlights are free "Blues on State Street" concerts at noon Monday through Friday under the marquee of the Chica-



Earl King

go Theatre; a "Blues & Gospel on Film" program, 3 p.m. Sunday at the Du Sable Museum,

showcasing rare blues and gospel footage; and "Blues on the Airwaves and in the Groove," a free program at 7 p.m. Monday in the Chess Recording Studios, featuring some of the city's best-known blues deejays discussing blues radio and the city's landmark Chess label.

A number of venues around the city will be the sites of special concerts during the week. On Thursday, the Benson & Hedges Blues Express runs among six clubs. The bus ride is free; one \$5 ticket will be good for admission at all six clubs. (For more on the bus ride, see the *After Hours* column on Page 2 of this week's Friday section.)

The crown jewels of the series are concerts to be held Oct. 12 and Oct. 13 at the Arie Crown Theatre. The Oct. 12 show features John Lee Hooker, whose recent album, "The Healer," became a bona fide blues hit and introduced a new generation to his inimitable style; renowned New Orleans pi-

anist Dr. John and the Felicity Street Funk Band with a special guest, legendary Chicago blues producer, songwriter and performer Willie Dixon; Elvin Bishop, who as a member of the Chicago-based Butterfield Blues Band helped ignite the blues revival of the '60s; and one of the city's finest contemporary blues groups, the Kinsey Report.

The Oct. 13 show is dedicated to "Dynamic Divas of Rhythm & Blues." On the bill are Chicago's own Queen of the Blues, Koko Taylor; actress and singer Nell Carter, who performs music inspired by classic blues queens of the '20s; "Miss Rhythm," Ruth Brown, who became one of R&B's biggest stars with such hits as "Teardrops From My Eyes" and "(Mama) He Treats Your Daughter Mean"; and the Soul Queen of New Orleans, Irma Thomas. A portion of the proceeds from both nights goes to the Interfaith Council for the Homeless.

For a complete Benson & Hedges Blues schedule, see the

Blues category in Friday's This Week listings or call the Benson & Hedges Blues hotline at 24-BLUES.

### Other shows of note

**Yousseou NDour**, Friday at the Riviera: This Senegalese singer is a superstar in Africa and a popular performer in Europe, bolstered by appearances on albums by Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon and a featured spot in the Amnesty International "Human Rights Now" tour. NDour's contribution to contemporary African music was to add modern instrumentation, particularly electric guitar and keyboards, to the percussive, complex traditional Wolof music of Senegal. Though not as immediately accessible and danceable as some forms of Afropop, NDour's music is filled with variety and invention. His newly released album "Set" focuses more closely on the percussive, rhythmic heart of the music and, as a result, is perhaps the finest album he has released in this country to date.

**MC 900 Ft Jesus and Consolidated**, Friday at Cabaret Metro: These two groups, who made separate appearances here earlier this year, are part of an exciting new wave of performers adding wit, intelligence, politics and new influences to rap and industrial music. MC 900 Ft Jesus mixes rap with aggressive industrial rock and quirky

See Concert line, page R

# Passionate purpose



Tribune photo by Val Mazzenga

Willie Dixon will make a rare concert appearance Friday at the Arie Crown Theatre.

By Dan Kening

If there was ever an elder statesman of the blues, surely it's Willie Dixon. Who else would have the audacity to title both an album and his autobiography "I Am the Blues"?

Dixon, who will be making a rare concert appearance Friday at the Arie Crown Theatre as part of the Benson & Hedges Blues Festival, is arguably the premier blues songwriter of all time.

His credits include such standards as "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man," "Little Red Rooster," "My Babe," "I Just Want to Make Love to You," "Spoonful," "I Can't Quit You Baby" and "Wang Dang Doodle," made famous by such blues artists as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter and Koko Taylor. His songs have also been recorded by non-blues artists ranging from the Rolling Stones to Peggy Lee.

During his long association with Chicago's Chess Records, Dixon also was a record producer, session bassist, talent scout and recording artist.

At age 75, he remains a man on a mission. Looking dapper in a striped shirt, dark tie and suspenders in his room at the Chicago Hilton and Towers (he moved from Chicago to Southern California for health reasons several years ago), he's passionate about seeing blues music and musicians get the recognition they deserve.

"The blues has suffered because it's never been publicized like the other musics in the world," he said in the patented growl that's become as much his signature as the wide-brimmed hats he favors. "At the time the blues came along, which was

early in American life, the majority of the people felt like anything that black folks created was wrong anyway. They had a resentment against the blues.

"People have always said that blues is a 'sad' music or an 'ignorant' music. They don't know that there's as much wisdom in the blues as there is. The blues makes a statement about the facts of life. Everyone can understand it because it's down to earth and it's not sophisticated. You don't need to have much education to understand what it's talking about."

Dixon has been enjoying something of a revival in recent years. He was profiled last year in People magazine, and in September the Da Capo Press published "I Am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story." (Dixon will appear at a book signing at 7 p.m. Thursday at Guild Books, 2456 N. Lincoln Ave.). Two years ago, MCA Records released a 36-song CD retrospective of his work, "Willie Dixon: The Chess Box," while his newest album, "Hidden Charms," produced by T-Bone Burnett, was released in 1988.

The album showed the increasingly topical nature of Dixon's recent songs, such as "It Don't Make Sense (If You Can't Make Peace)" and "It's in the News (Everybody's Got the Blues)."

"The blues changes, and today we're living in a political world," he said. "Years ago when the world was dealing in cotton and corn, the blues sung about those things. As the times change we sing about the changes."

**Willie Dixon wants to shed some light on the blues**

Perhaps closest to Dixon's heart these days is the not-for-profit Blues Heaven Foundation, which he founded in 1982. Formed to help blues musicians recover royalties due them, the foundation also awards an annual Muddy Waters Scholarship to a Chicago-area college student. It has donated \$12,000 worth of musical instruments to high schools in Chicago, Memphis, Los Angeles, Detroit and Vicksburg, Miss., Dixon's birthplace. Dixon and manager Scott Cameron are seeking a Chicago location for the foundation's headquarters, which is now based in Southern California.

"For a long time the record companies would pay black artists less money than anybody else got," Dixon said. "Through the Justice Department we found that you could sue these companies and get your rightful money. A lot of people didn't know how to go about it, so that's why I started the foundation—to help some of these people get what they deserved."

Dixon knows firsthand about fighting for what you deserve. When Led Zeppelin borrowed heavily from his "You Need Love" for its "Whole Lotta Love" without giving Dixon any songwriting credit, he sued the group, which resulted in a handsome out-of-court settlement.

These days Dixon may not do many live shows, but he keeps busy with the foundation, his songwriting and recording work.

Asked how he would like to be remembered 20 or 30 years from now, Dixon laughs.

"Where do you think I'll be in 20 or 30 years? I'll still be writing music. I ain't goin' nowhere for another 20 or 30 years!"

# Arts & Show

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## More rain can't ruin a downpour of blues

### BLUES FEST

By Don McLeese

They call it "Stormy Monday," but Tuesday was just as bad, and so was Wednesday. Although the early days of the weeklong Benson & Hedges Blues festival were filled with rain, the downpour could scarcely douse the spirit of Chicago blues, which the fest is celebrating with a series of events throughout the city.

The festival will continue to paint the town blue tonight with a "Blues Express" bus tour through some of the city's leading blues bars, and it will climax this weekend with a pair of concerts at the Arie Crown Theatre. Tomorrow's Arie Crown bill presents John Lee Hooker, Dr. John with Willie Dixon, Elvin Bishop and the Kinsey Report. Saturday's "Dynamic Divas" finale features singers Ruth Brown, Irma Thomas, Nell Carter and Koko Taylor.

Taylor gave fans an early treat Tuesday night when Chicago's "Queen of the Blues" joined Lonnie Brooks onstage at B.L.U.E.S. Etc. as his surprise guest. The festival bill paired Brooks with Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials in a double dose of blues at its most dynamic from Chicago's Alligator Records.

Alligator has turned itself into the world's leading blues label by

presenting the music as foot-stomping, house-rockin' party music rather than a purist's historical relic. Like the music of most Alligator acts, the blues of Brooks and Lil' Ed was light on surprises (other than Koko) and sophistication but heavy on impact and immediacy.

Lil' Ed Williams has made the biggest breakthrough on the local blues scene in recent years, with a style that recalls the rawest boogie of Hound Dog Taylor (the first Alligator artist) and ignores several decades of subsequent refinement. Although the Blues Imperials recently added a saxophonist to expand its lineup to five pieces, the band continues to specialize in high-decibel, gut-bucket blues at its most brutally basic.

Like the Chicago Bears, the band just kept slamming into the line Tuesday night as if the forward pass had never been invented, with Lil' Ed playing his slide guitar with all the grace of a forearm shiver.

As for headliner Brooks, his flamboyant showmanship and whipcrack-tight band have made him a Chicago favorite since he moved to the blues capital of the world from Louisiana. Keeping it all in the family, he matched stinging guitar licks with his son, Ronnie Baker Brooks, who showed that he has learned plenty about the music's power from the old man.



The rowdy, good-time music of guitarist Lil' Ed (second from left) and the Blues Imperials kept the weeklong party rolling with a Tuesday show at B.L.U.E.S. Etc. on the North Side.

Tuesday afternoon brought a "Masters of the Blues Piano" celebration to the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, featuring Sunnyland Slim, Big Moose Walker, Jimmy Walker and Erwin Helfer. Although Helfer was scheduled to begin the program with a history of the development of the Chicago style, he let the music swing in a manner that a lecture never could, playing with

an earthy elegance that showed how the blues could be simultaneously delicate and down-home.

Tonight, the festival will hit the road in the form of the Blues Express, with buses that will carry fans to and from six of the North Side's top blues clubs. Club admissions and transportation will be covered by one ticket, priced at \$5. Buses will begin loading at 9 p.m. at each club. Featured acts

will include: Buddy Scott and the Rib Tips at Blue Chicago, 937 N. State; Johnny B. Moore at B.L.U.E.S., 2519 N. Halsted; Son Seals at B.L.U.E.S. Etc., 1124 W. Belmont; the Imperial Flames at the Wise Fools Pub, 2270 N. Lincoln; Dion Payton and Michael Coleman at Kingston Mines, 2548 N. Halsted, and Billy Branch and the Sons of Blues at Rosa's, 340 W. Armitage.

# Chicagoland

Chicago Tribune Tuesday, October 9, 1990



Tribune photo by Ovie Carter

## Once more with feeling

David "Honeyboy" Edwards, a veteran of the Delta blues scene, shows why his career has spanned more than 50 years during a performance Monday at the Chicago Theatre as part of the Benson and Hedges Blues Festival.

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WHERE

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THIS MONTH IN

# CHICAGO

*Grab a cab! Here's what to see,  
 what to do this month in Chicago:  
 special events, music and more*

BY MARGARET DOYLE

## Special Events

Celebrate Chicago's blues heritage during the Benson & Hedges Blues festival (24-BLUES) held October 7-13 at various sites throughout the city. A series of free and ticketed concerts featuring more than 30 local and national artists, films and workshops are all planned to salute Chicago as the blues capital of the world. Highlights of the festival include two all-star concerts to benefit the homeless. The first, on

October 12, is entitled *Boogie 'til the Break of Day* and features John Lee Hooker, Dr. John and the Felicity Street Funk Band with special guests Willie Dixon, Elvin Bishop and The Kinsey Report. *A Salute to the Dynamic Divas of Rhythm and Blues*, held on October 13, showcases the talents of Koko Taylor, Nell Carter, Ruth Brown and Irma Thomas. Both concerts take place at McCormick Place's Arie Crown Theatre, 23rd Street and South Lake Shore Drive.

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**music**

# They call it the blues



Buddy Guy to host "Legends at Legends" Wednesday.

## Bands tune up for a soulful seven days

By Bob Kostanczuk

Staff writer

Its venues ranges from the gritty blues bars of Chicago to the elegant Arie Crown Theatre.

"Benson & Hedges Blues" kicks off Sunday and will run for seven days, featuring more than 30 local and national artists performing in 15 events, many of which are free to the public.

The third annual blues festival is designed to salute Chicago's rich heritage of rhythm and blues.

"To blues lovers," says the legendary Willie Dixon, "Chicago is not just a city, it's a state of mind, a place where the music lives."

Highlights of the Windy City fest include an Oct. 12 "Boogie 'Til the

Lee Hooker and Gary's own Kinsey Report.

Also on tap is an Oct. 13 concert at the Arie Crown featuring four top female blues vocalists — Nell Carter, Koko Taylor, Ruth Brown and Irma Thomas.

Here's a rundown of the events:

■ Oct. 7 — "Blues and Gospel Brunch," noon, Schuba's Tavern, 3159 N. Southport; "Blues & Gospel on Film," 3 p.m., DuSable Museum of African-American History, 740 E. 56th Place.

■ Oct. 8 — "Blues on State Street," with David "Honeyboy" Edwards, noon, Chicago Theatre, 176 N. State St.; "Blues on the Airwaves and in the Groove," 7



Blues vocalist Koko Taylor will perform Oct. 13 at the Arie Crown.

p.m., Chess Recording Studios, 2120 S. Michigan Ave.; "Stormy Monday, a Tribute to Howlin'...

noon, Chicago Theatre; "Benson & Hedges Blues Express," 9 p.m., a tour of various blues bars for one

St. (312) 477-4646.

■ Oct. 12 — "Blues on State Street" with the Rev. Leon Pinson and the Rev. Elder Wilson, noon, Chicago Theatre; "Boogie 'Til the Break of Day," 8 p.m., Arie Crown Theatre (Tickets are \$20 and \$25 and are available at Ticketron outlets).

■ Oct. 13 — "Dynamic Divas of Rhythm & Blues," 8 p.m., Arie Crown Theatre (Tickets are \$20 and \$25 and are available through Ticketron); "After Hours at the New Checkerboard," midnight, New Checkerboard Lounge, 423 E. 43rd St.

For more information about events, call (312) 242-5837.



LEFT: Koko Taylor will belt the blues on Oct. 13 with "Dynamic Divas of Rhythm & Blues." CENTER: Pianist Pinetop Perkins will appear Oct. 10 in "Legends at Legends Featuring the Antone's All-Stars." RIGHT: John Lee Hooker will "Boogie 'Til the Break of Day" at the Arie Crown on Oct. 12.

## Legends add luster to fest lineup

# 'Blues Capital' to live up to its title

**S**trike a match and start up the band. Here are selected highlights as Benson & Hedges Blues "Salutes the Blues Capital of the World," at various locations between Oct. 7 and 13:

- Noon, Oct. 7, "Blues and Gospel Brunch": Gloria Hardiman will host a musical brunch at Schuba's Tavern, 3159 N. Southport. Hardiman will sing in the midst of Schuba's regular country brunch.
- 3 p.m., Oct. 7, "Blues and Gospel on Film": Author and musician Lincoln Beauchamp and filmmaker Floyd Webb will moderate a screening of rare film footage of blues and gospel groups and discuss the connection between gospel and blues music at the Du Sable Museum of African-American History, 740 E. 56th Pl.
- Noon, Oct. 8, "Blues on State Street": Delta blues guitarist David "Honeyboy" Edwards will play a free concert under the marquee of the Chicago Theatre, 175 N. State.
- 7 p.m., Oct. 8, "Blues on the Airwaves and in the Groove": Blues DJs Richard Starnz, Tom Marker, Steve Cushing, Richard Pegue and Lucky Cordelle (they, where's Pervis Spann?) will talk about the history of Chicago blues radio at Chess Recording Studios, 2120 S. Michigan.
- Noon, Oct. 9, "Speaking of the Blues": Incisive pianist Erwin Helfer will host an oral history and demonstration on the development of Chicago blues styles at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, Preston Bradley Hall, third floor, 78 E. Washington. The program is being produced with the Chicago Blues Archives of the Chicago Public Library.
- 9 p.m., Oct. 10, "Legends at Legends Featuring the Antone's All-Stars": The undisputed highlight of the week—Antone's is the premier Austin, Texas, blues club owned by Clifford Antone. Saucy vocalist Angela Strehli and guitarist Derek O'Brien will be backed by Chicagoans Pinetop Perkins, bassist Calvin "Fuzz" Jones, drummer Willie "Big Eyes" Smith and highly underrated guitarist/Muddy Waters sideman Jimmy

Rogers. You can bet the house on a memorable jam in tribute to Stevie Ray Vaughan (another Antone's alumnus) to close the night. Buddy Guy will be the special guest host for the event, which will be at his club, Buddy Guy's Legends, 734 S. Wabash.

- Noon, Oct. 11, "Blues on State Street": The free noontime shows continue under the Chicago Theatre marquee with a perfect booking for the Benson & Hedges shindig: guitarist Smokey Smothers.
- 8 p.m., Oct. 12, "Boogie 'Til the Break of Day": John Lee Hooker, Elvin Bishop, the Kinsey Report with Big Daddy Kinsey and Dr. John, and the Felicity Street Funk Band featuring Willie Dixon will play at Arie Crown Theatre, McCormick Place, 2301 S. Lake Shore. Tickets are \$20 and \$25; \$1 of

each ticket will be donated to the Interfaith Council for the Homeless, an organization that funds homeless shelters in the Chicago area.

- 8 p.m., Oct. 13, "Dynamic Divas of Rhythm & Blues": This bill combines the talents of Nell Carter, Koko Taylor, Ruth Brown and Irma Thomas, also at the Arie Crown Theatre. Tickets are \$20 and \$25, with a \$1 donation going to the Interfaith Council for the Homeless.

- Midnight, Oct. 13 and Oct. 14, "Afterhours at the New Checkerboard": Johnny Christian will host a post-festival jam featuring surprise guests at the New Checkerboard Lounge, 423 E. 43rd St. (Muddy Waters Drive).

Dave Hoekstra

## Dixon feels the loss of 'third hand'

**C**hicago blues pianist Lafayette Leake was one of Willie Dixon's most trusted sidemen. Leake's first session with Dixon was in 1951, when they recorded the rudimentary "Pain in My Heart." Leake's last session with Dixon was on Dixon's 1988 Grammy-winning record, "Hidden Charms."

In between, Leake played on Chess cuts as diverse as Koko Taylor's dicey "Wang Dang Doodle" and Chuck Berry's "Maybelline." Dixon and Leake went on to become part of Chuck Berry's first traveling band. And as a member of the

Chess Records studio band, Leake often provided the "third hand" needed for Dixon's clever polyrhythms.

Leake, 74, died of bacterial infection on Aug. 14 at a Chicago Veterans Administration hospital. Dixon remembered his friend:

"Lafayette would never sing," Dixon said. "He was a piano player. I always felt anybody who could play could sing, too. But he had all the spirit and feeling of singing. Finally, I got him to sing a few words at a time and with the other guys in the band. Eventually he started making songs of his own."

"When I first heard him, I liked the feeling he had for most players," Dixon said. "He was very versatile. He could understand any way you told him to play. If he didn't know the style, he'd hear it on record and play it right the first time, every time. No job was too hard for him. He was so relaxed, a lot of people didn't think he was playing. Koko Taylor always said, 'I don't think that guy is even playing the piano.' I'd say, 'Can't you hear him?' She'd quit singing and you could barely hear him."

"I will miss him."

Dave Hoekstra

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